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LITERARY TRANSLATION IN THE CLASSROOM.
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LITERARY TRANSLATION IN THE CLASSROOM CAN PROVOKE DISCUSSION WITH GREAT PEDAGOGICAL VALUE EVEN THOUGH A DEFINITIVE TRANSLATION IS NOT THE GOAL. A VERSE FROM HORACE AND ONE FROM DU BELLAY ILLUSTRATE THE POSSIBLE CHOICES OF VOCABULARY AND PHRASING WHICH EVEN TWO RELATIVELY STRAIGHTFORWARD LINES PRESENT. AN ALERT TEACHER CAN BRING OUT SUBTLETIES OF MEANING REFLECTING PAST WAYS OF LIFE, CORRELATE THEM TO CURRENT EXPRESSION, AND SHARPEN A STUDENT'S UNDERSTANDING OF BOTH A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND HIS OWN. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ARCH," VOLUME 14, NUMBER 1, WINTER 1966-67, PAGES 1-6. (GJ)

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THE ARCH

LITERARY TRANSLATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Teachers of language tend to think of translation both as an essential tool of their trade and as a basic obstacle to their success. It is an essential tool because it is, especially in the early stages, the simplest way to find out whether the student understands the text, and to clear up his misconceptions and difficulties if he does not. But it is also an obstacle, a hurdle that must be cleared before the student can pass from translating, which means understanding the language in its own terms without recourse to any other tongue. (Since that is my subject, I shall concentrate on the translation of literary texts, but without any implied derogation of other essential abilities, such as skill in hearing and speaking.)

Ordinary class translation is a pretty crude affair, and properly so, since the translation is supposed to do no more than to indicate an understanding of the original. Literary translation is an entirely different matter. It is an attempt to take a text of some aesthetic value and turn it into a text of similar value in another language -- the "target" language -- reproducing, as far as is humanly possible, every value, every shading of tone, every nuance of feeling. This is not merely a demanding task; it is, as every experienced translator knows, an impossible one. It is also an essential one in the intellectual commerce between nations, and I intend here to suggest that it is an instructive one for the student of a foreign language to attempt from time to time.

Having long since been paroled after serving a long term as a teacher of English composition, I naturally value the training in the writing of English which literary translation can give. The trouble with the ordinary English theme is that the student has nothing to say, and all too often manages to say it. Translation offers the advantage of supplying something to say, but leaving the student with the problem of how best to say it. But the point at the moment is not the training in English, but rather the necessity for close and accurate reading of the original language in order to make an acceptable translation. Coleridge tells us how a Greek teacher of his at Christ's Hospital used to take a dictionary of Homeric synonyms, select a key word in a passage, and have his students explain what difference it would make if each synonym had been used instead of Homer's actual word. Literary translation gives the student a similar exercise in finding which of the English possibilities most nearly reproduces the meaning and effect of the original one.

Normal classroom translation does not do this, and quite properly does not. Since the English version is used to indicate an understanding of the original rather than to reproduce it, too much attention to the production of a polished translation would probably lead to more thinking in English, and hence would inhibit the effort to think and understand in the foreign tongue. The occasional attempt to produce a viable translation can, however, afford an opportunity for sharpening the student's linguistic and literary awareness of the finer points of the original work.

Basically, there are three modes of literary translation, which could be classified (if other things ever were really equal) in an order of ascending difficulty: the translation of prose into prose, of poetry into prose, and of poetry into verse. (If one were bull-headed enough, he could, of course, also translate prose into verse!) Prose into prose is the normal procedure of almost all informational translation and of many literary renderings, such as those of novels. Verse is most usually translated into prose in English in the rendition of large-scale works written in forms not easily domesticated, as in the distinguished prose versions of Homer's hexameters in the Butcher and Lang Odyssey and of Dante's terza rima in the Carlyle, Okey, and Wicksteed Divine Comedy. We seldom translate lyric poetry into prose, but in France even the poets do it regularly: Baudelaire's and Mallarme's celebrated translations of Poe's poetry are in prose. Verse into verse is (when really well done) the crown of the translator's art. Few students should be encouraged to attempt it -- but more on that point later.

In what follows,I shall assume that the language teacher who wants to use literary translation as an auxiliary teaching aid will aim at translations, whether of prose or of verse, into English prose, and I shall draw my illustrations from the mode of verse into prose because verse usually presents the problems in a more concentrated form.

There are really two ways of handling literary translation for a class. It will not do simply to have students make translations and hand them in. If this is done, the quality of the translations will probably be about what could be predicted from each student's grades in the foreign language and in English, but little will be learned. Learning will come only from the criticism of suggestions and the discussion of alternatives. Translations can be handed in and then read, compared, and discussed, but students may be unwilling (or too willing, for irrelevant reasons) to criticize each other's finished efforts. Hence the best method seems to be to try to have a translation worked out by the class as a committee of the whole with the teacher (as in most democratic processes) rigging the results where necessary.

Most students, and probably a good many teachers who have never attempted literary translation, will be surprised at the number of questions to be answered and decisions to be made in even the most simple, straightforward sort of passage.

"Exegi monumentum aere perennius," Horace exults at the beginning of an ode on his literary immortality (3.30). This line offers no difficulty to even a half-competent Latin student, and the ordinary sort of classroom translation follows almost automatically: "I have built a monument more lasting than brass." This is not bad, and is certainly acceptable, but a little thought will make for a good deal of dissatisfaction. Is "I have built" the best rendering for "exegi"? One builds a monument of brick or cut stone, but doesn't the comparison of durability with brass imply that the monument is conceived as a statue or a memorial tablet? And can one "build" either of these things? (But of course there are pyramids in the next line.) Maybe "erected" will do -- but no, it is too pedantic, too much like bureaucratese -- and besides, the sculptor doesn't necessarily erect (i.e., install) the statue. What about "raised" or "raised up"? Or "set up"? Or something different from all these, like "made" or "produced" -- or even our current fad, "created"? And is "monument" really the best word, or is it merely one of those cognates that leap to the lips without passing through the brain? In some ways "memorial" comes closer to Horace's intention here, but it is not so concrete as "monument," and Horace is referring to a very tangible body of poetry. Yet, since he goes on to say that his what-you-may-call-it is not subject to the attrition of weather, he is obviously aware that poems are not tangible, and hence not destructible, in the way that statues are. Still, all things considered, "monument" seems to be better than "memorial", and these two words seem to be the only real choices.

What about "more lasting"? It seems a bit clumsy, and fails to give the sense of defying the <u>years</u> contained in the original <u>perennius</u>. "More lasting" does not in itself imply any great durability: one soap bubble can be more lasting than another. But "perennial" is impossible. For one thing, it suggests a seed catalogue, and for another, it is an absolute: in English we cannot speak of one thing as being more perennial than another. (Why?) "Durable" refers to the potentiality of survival rather than the actual fact. Maybe "more enduring" is the expression we need, or perhaps we should settle for the "more lasting" that we started from, as being better than anything else that we have found -- or possibly we should keep on trying to find something better.

This brings us to aere, and to a complicated problem. The two possible translations are "brass" and "bronze." In current English, these are two different alloys, and the Romans of Horace's time used bronze, but not brass. Surely, then, it will have to be "bronze." But no. "Bronze" is a comparative late-comer in English. "Brass" was for a long time used for both alloys, and even after "bronze" became current, it was some time before the two were distinguished: Johnson's dictionary (1755) defines "bronze" as "brass." In the English literary tradition, then (though not in a treatise on metallurgy), "brass" is a perfectly acceptable translation of aes, and a translator of Horace has the choice between "bronze" and "brass." We normally think of bronze statues, but of brass tablets. To me, "brass" somehow seems more straightforward and forceful. But now another question arises. "Brass" has also the meaning, and hence a suggestion, of self-assertiveness and insolence. Aes does not have such a primary meaning. Can it have such a suggestion? For Horace, it apparently can. In another ode (1.3) he refers to the first man who dared to sail the sea as having a heart fortified by triple brass (aes triplex), and this passage may even have contributed to the association of brass with insolence which is found in many modern languages. The claim to have written poems which will defy the years and the weather, outlast any physical memorial, and confer immortality on the author is not exactly a modest one. Horace has a good deal of quiet irony, and perhaps the overtones of "brass" are intentional here. Even if they are not, would a translator be justified in adding them as a contribution of his own? I don't think so, but the question is certainly a legitimate one for discussion.

By this time it should be apparent that a simple prose translation of a linguistically simple line is by no means a simple undertaking. As long as we are at it, we may as well add to the confusion. So far we have simply assumed that one translates words and syntax, but maybe that is not the way to go about it. Perhaps we should ignore the mechanics and try to reproduce the idea. "My poems will outlast all monuments" -- "I have made things that time cannot destroy" -- "My poetry will put your bronze to shame" -- the possibilities now are infinite. (Note an interesting phenomenon here. On looking back,I find that, when freed of the attempt to reproduce words, I unconsciously slipped away from prose and produced three versions in iambic pentameter) With the vastly extended possibilities of free translation we may take our leave of this line, noting that we have not produced an adequate translation, but that the pedagogical value of this sort of exercise lies in the attempt rather than in any final authorized version.

Another line, more briefly considered, will show some problems of a somewhat different type. Du Bellay begins a famous sonnet "Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage." Assuming a close rather than a free translation, we find two types of problems here. The first is one of syntax:

in English we simply cannot say "Happy who has made . . . ." Should we keep it simply an exclamation ("Happy the man who . . . .!"), or should we supply a verb and make a sentence ("Happy is he who . . . .!")? What are the pros and cons of this question? Could Du Bellay have done this in French, and what difference would it have made? The second type of problem here involves really difficult choices among simple words. Is "heureux" to be taken as "happy," "fortunate," lucky," or what? What does Du Bellay actually mean by the word, and what English word will best render that meaning? Similarly (and we may as well consider the words together here) "un beau voyage" is clearly not "a beautiful voyage," but is it "a fine voyage," or "a good journey" or -- since the language of the young is real and moving to them -- "a swell trip"? Perhaps the most interesting question in this line has to do with the proper name itself. It is both simple and obvious to render "Ulysse" as Ulysses" -- but is it necessarily right? In Du Bellay's time Greek culture and literature were just beginning to be studied from the original sources, after a thousand years of transmission through Latin. The Latin or Latinized names of Greek gods and heroes were so well established that they hung on for centuries more, and began to give way only in the present century. The man in the street is still more likely to know Venus than Aphrodite, or Mars than Ares. But since the Butcher and Lang Odyssey (1879), the English reading public has come more and more to accept Ulysses as a character in Vergil, Dante, and Tennyson, but to think of Homer's hero as Odysseus. I am not sure that I would not prefer to translate Du Bellay's "Ulysses" from Latin into Greek rather than from French into English, and thus to render the name as "Odysseus."

The attempt to translate poetry into verse is probably best left out of the classroom. After all, there are techniques of versification, and most of our students know nothing about them. The attempt of the unskilled to produce rhymes (which are usually faulty) and a sort of jog-trot (which he takes for meter) are so agonized as to leave no chance for meaning, let alone tone and nuance. Dryden said that the poetaster Elkanah Settle could not be bothered with craftmanship and revision,

> But faggoted his notions as they fell,
> And if they rhymed and rattled, all was well.

I am afraid that most students would demand no more of their verse translations. The other alternative would be the translation of strict verse into free or merely sloppy verse, a procedure which, though commercially quite successful, is a literary abomination.

There are, of course, many problems which come up in literary translation in addition to the ones in the two lines we have considered. There is the problem of tone -- of translating the rare word by a rare word, the slangy by the slangy, the crude by the crude, and the archaic by the archaic. There is the problem of keeping or suggesting inversions and other departures from the normal and expected order of words. There are the special cases where the translator must try to be specific when the target language normally is not, or must try to keep vague or ambiguous what is normally specific in the target language. There are puns and other forms of word-play. All these things the alert teacher will bear in mind, and propose as problems for discussion. The problems will not, in the nature of things, be carried to definitive solutions, but the attempt to solve them, the occasional head-on confrontation with them, can do a great deal to sharpen a student's understanding both of a foreign language and of his own.

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